

NOT EVEN PAST



Competent Flutterbys and My Semester of Struggle

Tweet

by Rachel Herrmann

I passed my comprehensive exams in 2010, but I still have dreams about them. I wake up in the middle of the night, convinced that I have yet another portion of my exams to complete. Sometimes this portion inexplicably involves a swimming race. Watching my grad student colleagues finish up their exams as they prepare to leave for dissertation research has sparked a few memories, so I thought I'd write about comps so that people have a sense of what it is that most third-year grad students *do* all year.



"What are comps?" you ask. Well, most graduate students come into the program at UT with some idea of what they want to study, but comprehensive exams—comps for short—are designed to give us a deeper understanding of our areas of history. By the time we've finished, we can make connections between different historians, and are ready to start work on our dissertations. Everyone puts together a comps committee with three professors, each of whom assigns a list of at least 50 books. And then you read them all, compose a writing portfolio consisting of about 40 pages of writing per professor, and take an oral exam so your committee can make sure you really know what you're talking about. That's the norm, though one professor in the department has a notoriously lengthy list of over 500 books. Three professors. 150+ books. 120 pages of writing. One three-hour oral exam. Two semesters. Ready, GO!

The general idea is that at the end of comps, graduate students will allow one transformed wing to emerge from the chrysalis of grad school, fluttering one puff of air closer to the fully-transformed professorial butterflies that we will all, hypothetically, become.

My first semester went fairly well. I flew through my book a day, and balanced reading with my TA grading and teaching responsibilities. By the end of the semester, however, I had a number of grant applications due, and after spending two months mostly focusing on polishing my dissertation proposal and applying for as many grants and fellowships as I could, I'd fallen behind. Spring semester began, and because I

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knew I still had 125 books to read, I dubbed it my Semester of Struggle.

Comps brings out the best and the worst in people. I found out what I had to do to keep my life afloat. I learned that I am capable of skimming and absorbing the arguments of three books per day, that I prefer coffee in the morning and tea in the afternoon, that I can read a book while half paying attention to a Longhorns football game, and that my feet get very cold if I extend them on the couch for more than four hours.

Comps highlighted some of my dorkier study and reading preferences. Most graduate students won't buy all of their comps books—too expensive. You can't write in books you don't own, and so I used sticky notes to index notable paragraphs. After many technical experiments, I discovered that I like to use small, rectangular sticky notes to mark pages in my books, but don't like the Post-it made ones because they don't stick well enough. I DO, however, like the Post-it cube of sticky notes, so I buy that and, before starting a new book, cut the rectangular strips that I want. I realized how ridiculous this nitpicky preference was when packing for Thanksgiving break: it occurred to me that I would not be able to pack scissors in my carry-on bag, which meant I had to prepare a super-large supply of sticky notes to take with me on the plane.

Not buying comps books also meant that I spent a lot of time checking out books from the library, and recalling books from other grad students if those books were missing from the shelves. There were at least five times during the semester when I attempted to recall a book *from myself* because it was cocooned in the private library that used to be my bedroom. In a regularly-occurring bout with insomnia, I hadn't realized that the book in question was checked out to me. Luckily the library prevents this sort of behavior by making it technologically impossible to recall a book from yourself.

The nicest thing about reading for comprehensive exams is that there are always a handful of grad students doing the same thing. My roommate and I may or may not have spent nights lining up our stuffed animals to cheer us on as we sat reading late into the night. She understood when I felt the need to take a break from reading by baking four dozen cookies. She didn't laugh when she recommended a novel and I responded that I hadn't read it, but knew the argument, or when I went to the library and accidentally dropped a whole unopened packet of sugar into my coffee.

Other grad students bonded over Facebook. My friend Libby posted a status that said, "If I have a couple hundred books in my car and I park it outside all day in the 105-degree Austin summer heat, is there any chance that the whole thing will just catch on fire?" We all laughed because we knew how she felt. Our Facebook statuses changed depending on how well a day's reading was going: "Feeling COMPetent" on good days; "InCOMPetent" on bad ones. "Complicating and contextualizing comps" when a particular book was too filled with jargon, and "Compity compity comps" when we were feeling silly.

I read, and read, and read some more, churned out essays, wrote lectures, and perfected syllabi for my portfolio. I soared high enough to glimpse the peaks of Historical Brilliance, and spiraled back down to the valleys of Academic Despair. I went into my oral exams feeling nervous, but okay, and determined that if all else failed I would make my committee members laugh by telling history jokes. I briefly contemplated bribing them with baked goods, but decided against it because I was out of time to make cookies.

In the end, everything went fine, and I emerged from my comps feeling as if I was smart, well-versed in my fields, and ready to tackle the dissertation. I felt like the world's most competent half-butterfly. I was a



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